

The Language Learning Experiences of a Japanese Expatriate in Germany

Juergen J. Bulach

Abstract

I conducted the following interview with a Japanese expatriate who resides and works in Germany. The interview was in English and took place in March, 2013. The purpose of the interview was to highlight some of the language-learning challenges which Japanese expatriates may encounter when they are sent to foreign countries. It is not my intention to portray this interviewee's foreign experiences as typical of all expatriates who are posted overseas but only to show how one individual overcame his own linguistic difficulties.

How long have you been here in Germany now and how long do you plan to stay here?

I've been here two and a half years and will stay maybe for another two or three years but I'm not sure because my headquarters in Japan will make that decision.

What is your specialty?

I used to be a chemist but now I am responsible for research and development in our company. Now I am responsible for research and development and other matters.

What previous international experience did you have before coming to Germany?

To be honest, this is my first experience to live in a foreign country. I have gone on international business trips but only five or six times. The first one was to give a presentation at an international conference but it was about five years ago. At that time I was 40 years old. Then three years ago I was transferred from the research and development branch in Japan to the international division. The reason was because I had to start up the business in Germany. I was the first person from my company to come here.

What are the nationalities of your colleagues and how many are there?

I have two offices, one in our factory and one in our research and development section. In our factory we have three colleagues, one of whom is German and the other two are Japanese. One Japanese colleague came from Japan and the other Japanese person is a woman who is married to a German. She speaks German, Japanese and English.

What are the languages used at your workplace?

In my office, I usually use English and Japanese because that woman helps us a lot. Japanese is also ok in our office. In the research and development center most of the colleagues are German people and they are very fluent in English so we use only English.

How would you assess the English abilities of your German colleagues?

They speak at a high level, at a business level.

Do they communicate in English or in German with each other?

They usually communicate with each other in German but when I join them, they use only English.

Are you the only foreign employee there?

We have five colleagues besides me. Other than me the other colleague is a Brazilian but she graduated from a German university in this area, so she can speak German very fluently but is also very fluent in English. Maybe she is the most fluent English speaker in my company, more than the Germans.

What is the most important language of communication among your colleagues?

Of course it's English because it's the only common language for us.

How much of the communication, percentage-wise, would you say is conducted in the three languages?

In the factory, we use Japanese about fifty percent and thirty percent English but the rest is German. My German colleague also speaks very fluent English. But in the research and development center we use only English. In addition, last year one

trainee was transferred from Japan to Germany but he lived only one year here. He works in the research and development center where we use only English. I tried to use only English even with him.

How did that work?

It was only while he was in training. He conducted some experiments and he took some training from German colleagues. He'll leave next week.

How important is German in your workplace?

To be honest, it isn't important in my office because our German is very limited so we don't have any chance to use German in a business level.

How would you describe your level of German?

I'm only a beginner. At this moment I can communicate very simply in hotels, in restaurants, in shopping centers, only when we order something, at the minimum level. If they like to communicate in detailed things, I cannot understand.

When you contact another company do you do it yourself?

It depends on the situation. If we can use English in the situation, we do it ourselves. If we call a domestic company in Germany, we request a colleague to do that for the first time. Usually we have a German colleague make the first call and then we have the opportunity to have a meeting. Then we can see in the meeting what their English level is like. If it is ok, then we feel comfortable to call them by ourselves.

Before you came to Germany how would you assess your level of English ability?

Oh, yes, upper-beginner or lower-intermediate.

What was your past English language learning experience in Japan?

In Japan we have the compulsory education in junior high school and high school. Usually that's all of our opportunity to use English. But after then when I was in university I didn't have so many opportunities to speak English but I studied in a chemical department so I had some opportunities to read some literature in my field in English. But I didn't have any opportunity to hear or speak English.

Did you go to an English conversation school during or after university?

When I was in university I didn't have an opportunity but when I started working in a company and then I had an opportunity to go to an English conversation school but only once a week for one year. This was just after I started to work at my company. Just before I came here to Germany then I had an opportunity to go to an English conversation school twice a week for just several months. It was conversation based.

Were your teachers Japanese or Native-English Speakers?

The teacher was a German woman but she spoke very fluent English. Maybe the principal of that conversation school arranged for that woman to teach me because he knew I will be transferred to Germany, so I can learn English and then if I have the opportunity, I can change the language from English to German. And she's very friendly and we still communicate by e-mail.

In addition to going to an English-language school, what else did you do to improve your English before being posted to Germany?

I tried a lot of things. For example, in Japan we have the opportunity to have a radio program in English especially NHK gives us a lot of opportunity. Also, after that, I realized it is not enough so I purchased an English text and CD. I used it everyday, maybe one hour per day.

How would you assess your level of English ability now?

Now I use English in a business situation. I think it's upper-intermediate or low-advanced.

How did you experience first getting used to a multilingual work environment?

It was very difficult because as you know in this area most of the people don't use English. Younger people can speak English but older people don't so it was very difficult for me but we survived by using limited English.

Since you have been in Germany, what have been the most effective ways for you to improve your English?

First, I expected I can improve my English earlier because we have the opportunity to use English in a business situation but I couldn't so I was very upset and then I started to study English by myself.

How soon after you came here did you start studying English by yourself?

After several months.

In what ways?

I bought some texts and CD and then I studied by myself. That was my main study of English. I did this everyday, one or two hours by myself, but also listened to the CD while I was driving.

Which English skill was the weakest before coming to Germany-speaking, listening, reading or writing?

I think speaking was the most difficult, not only for me but for most Japanese speaking is the most difficult because we don't have much opportunity to speak English. Speaking, speaking, speaking is the only way to improve our speaking skills of English. After that, I could speak a little, my listening ability also improved, I felt.

How did you improve that speaking skill exactly?

The most efficient way was speaking daily. I used a Japanese company, a program, maybe most Japanese have heard of this program called ALC, of course it has programs, mine which were advanced. That was very efficient for me. It specified speaking, shadowing and repeating. That is a very efficient way, I think.

Did you use this program everyday?

Oh, yes, everyday. I studied only speaking, shadowing, repeating one hour per day, everyday. The sentences are very simple but I had to speak and repeat the same kind of sentences. First, I had some doubt, is that efficient for me? But it was efficient.

And so how much has that skill improved since your arrival in Germany?

Significantly, I could improve. First my English was very limited. Now I can speak a little fluently, I think.

How would you describe the typical conversations you have in English, Japanese and German at your workplace?

Of course, I'm a native Japanese speaker so I can communicate in Japanese very detailed and specified technical things and everything I can communicate. And English, also I could improve my English so now I can communicate about detailed

and technical things. At the beginning I could not do this. German is still very limited, like greetings and small word, survival level.

So the type of English communication that you do now is different than before you came to Germany. What can you communicate in English now?

Now I can communicate in a long discussion in English such as in meetings. I can also give a long presentation with slides. Of course, we have to prepare something with slides but I can give a long presentation.

What kind of communication exchanges do you still find the most difficult at your workplace?

I have a colleague who is a native-speaker of British English. His English is very difficult to hear because it has a lot of dialect. Also, he uses very difficult English, maybe it's sophisticated. He's not from the center of England but in the country area. That's why it is very hard to understand. Also, our company has some opportunities to communicate with another company in the Netherlands. Still I am not familiar with the English used by people in the Netherlands.

How much of your former English education in Japan helped you to prepare for your present job experience here in Germany?

It was very good, I think, because if we don't have the opportunity to take English in junior high school and high school then we would never understand English. I can read and write but we do not have the opportunity to speak and hear. That is very limited. That is the problem in Japan.

How would you have preferred to have learned English in Japan?

Japan is changing because of global companies but still we don't have opportunities to hear and speak English. Maybe I would use DVDs, TV dramas and cinemas and also nowadays the internet system has improved significantly, so I have some opportunities to use the Skype system. There are a lot of online lessons. That is very helpful. Also, some people from the Philippines give online lessons and that is very reasonable.

Have you taken such online lessons?

No, I never have. I heard and can imagine how they are because I have a friend who

speaks very excellent English because he did these online lessons.

What advice would you give to Japanese professionals, like yourself, who are planning to work in English-language work environments?

First, they should assess their current English level. Then they should not study much higher than their level that's very important, I think. They should repeat the English lesson at their levels.

How would you like to continue learning English in the future?

The most efficient way is to use English in my business situation. Then reading, hearing a lot. Reading newspapers and websites, also using DVDs and TV dramas. That's also efficient. My feeling is that is the most important way, otherwise they cannot improve their English. Some Japanese believe that if they take lessons by native speakers, they can improve but it is very difficult. Of course, the opportunity to communicate with other people is very efficient but if they use only in those situations, they cannot improve their English so much, I think.

Thank you very much for this interview.

You are welcome.